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ABSTRACT

This article describes the experience of a teacher invited to discuss Paul Cowan's "An Orphan in History" at a "Let's Talk About It" book program on the theme, "Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols." This was one of a series of book reading and discussion programs jointly sponsored by the American Library Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the New Hampshire Humanities Council, and the New Hampshire State Library. The teacher's own search for ethnic roots, personal reminiscences about experiences with anti-semitism, and thoughts about the conflicting ideals espoused by German and Eastern European Jewish ancestors inspired by "An Orphan in History" are compared with the content of the book, which is the personal history of a contemporary journalist who investigates and embraces his Jewish roots. In addition, other readers' reactions to the book are discussed, and it is noted that each reader perceived the book differently and each had an ethnic insight to share. Finally, the four group study questions prepared for the book talk are presented. A listing of four additional books on the same theme which were also discussed at book talk programs is provided. (KM)

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Revelation in a Public Library: Reflections on Ethnicity and Teaching

Bonnie S. Sunstein

As all teachers know, burnout takes many forms and doesn't always result in leaving the profession. Sometimes, it can result in a discovery and a renewed love for a quality of teaching we forgot was there. This October, I accepted an interesting project which offered me what looked like a happy diversion. The New Hampshire State Library and the Council for the Humanities (see note at end of article) invited me to discuss Paul Cowan's *An Orphan in History*, a personal history by a contemporary journalist who, at midlife, investigates and embraces the Jewish roots his parents had denied him. The project was seductive; it gave me an excuse to read a book not in my curriculum, a promise of compensation worthy of the preparation, a chance to make connections with public libraries, both local and state, and the formidable task of planning a lecture for a group of adult booklovers who considered me an expert in being Jewish, a fact about myself I've largely ignored.

What I didn't foresee was how it would transform me — a burned out teacher in the midst of a midlife crisis. The deep emotional identification I felt with Cowan led me to a very personal self-examination. Then, knowing that I had to lecture on his book, that self-examination led me to generalize for other people less personally involved. By the time I wrote the group study questions, I realized that I had been merely practicing the theories we all cherish for our students. I had moved myself from the expressive mode through the transactional. I had experienced a quiet and satisfying inductive self-discovery by reading, writing, listening and speaking with a very specific audience and purpose. I had researched out of the library and in the library, with all the strategies and tools I could imagine. The best insight, though, was the one most embarrassing for a person who has been teaching twenty years. I realized that the whole point in teaching ethnic literature is teaching literature itself. Ethnic literature is about inner and outer searches, self examination, the importance of parents of children, ancestors to descendents—the continuum of life and its effects on us. It was exciting for me that I had special insights to share, but it wasn't essential.

At first, the project brought me face to face with some personal dilemmas. I am not a practicing Jew, yet I was being asked to read

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a book about someone who discovers himself in midlife by recognizing his Jewishness. I was afraid of my lack of expertise. I didn't know enough about my own roots to feel much ethnic identity. I never thought of myself first as Jewish; I am an American, a native Philadelphian, a mother, a wife, a teacher, a woman, a concerned citizen with forty-ish values honed on the active student life of the early sixties. I live in New Hampshire, where the population of distinct ethnic groups is minimal, and the readers I would meet in the library are largely white, Christian, and have been assimilated into American culture since Martin Pring sailed up the Piscataqua River in 1603. I already have two full time jobs. I run a college learning center, teach day and evening courses, manage a household complete with a high tech husband and two complicated children. The babysitting implications alone were enough to suggest that I decline this offer. But the lure of the unknown, the thrill of the potential, some kind of cosmic energy drove me to say yes. So I set out to read the book and found that it was a chronicle of someone whose roots are much like mine, whose underlying motives are much like mine. Even some of the people in his acknowledgements were people I knew. I've had the same mysteries in my life — the same conflicts between my ethnic identity and my American assimilation, the same need to search.

And so I searched. I found myself sobbing as I read letters from my ancestors, tearing through my mother's boxes of old family pictures, checking old facts and family suspicions, stacking and sorting piles of notes at 3 a.m., and completely losing my objectivity. My mother and I talked for hours long distance; I heard family stories and learned family facts. I called my cousin in New York for Cowan's address and phone number. I never actually called Cowan, but I did find *The Village Voice Reader* and read most of his major essays. All this seemed like my early teaching behavior — frenetic and obsessive, but purposeful and happy.

I noticed that through his life, Cowan sensed echoes that reminded him of his roots, leading him toward maturity as he discovered truths about himself. At Choate, he saw himself as Robert Cohen in *The Sun Also Rises*, the "prototypical defenseless Jew" (13). At Harvard, he was like Normal Mailer's Arthur, the "passive Jew boy" in "The Time of Her Time," who couldn't fight back (108), so he fought with words in the offices of *The Crimson* and then in Israel during a struggle of moral standards with an enemy named Itzhak at a bar called the "Last Chance" (113). He continued his journey in the southern United States, among other young white members of SNCC (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and poor rural blacks, himself uncomfortable with the

results of his efforts. His quest, as so many of our quests during the sixties and seventies, brought him to the Peace Corps in Ecuador where he eventually felt like an exploiting symbol of government. He chronicled both demonstrators and police at the Democratic Convention of 1968 in Chicago, felt imprisoned in the "walls of collective anger" during the Viet Nam protests, spent time with the Berrigan brothers, and in writing about their commitment to Jesus and non-violence, began to resume the spiritual journey which led him to his own New York, the Lower East Side, the poor rabbis and scholars who would uncover his own story, and ultimately to the Upper West Side synagogue which he and his family helped to shape. At each juncture, it was the awareness of his differences that brought him from discomfort to insight.

My journey was not quite so elegant, but it took me through the offices of my high school and college newspapers, political campaigns, Viet Nam teach-ins with my first eighth graders, tenements with VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) in southern New Hampshire, and I too examined my own abilities, my own differences among the people I was fighting for. Like Cowan, I experienced quiet anti-semitism and dismissed it as New England ignorance. Like Cowan, my quest through the politics and sociology of my generation led me to maturity. I expect that we all reach middle age with insights based on the energy of early adulthood, but Cowan's quest and mine were so similar.

Of course in every quest story there is the part about the hero's secret identity. One of the suspicions I needed to confirm was one Cowan and I both had. The conflict between the German Jews and the Eastern European Jews was one that had nagged me all my life. "Don't call it a conflict, honey," my mother cautioned when I asked her, "It was a discomfort." She was a German Jew, as Cowan's mother had been. Her ancestors had come with the early wave of German immigrants, after the failure of the liberal revolutions of 1848. They went west in wagon trains with the Homestead Act, made German settlements in the midwest, fought in the Civil War, and brought with them the beginnings of Reform Judaism, a movement rooted in both Jewish tradition and German philosophy which they planted firmly in American soil and hybridized into American culture. Their descendents became the American Jewish elite and powerful; they went to expensive colleges and became powerful figures in American business, art, science, and academia. Cowan's mother was Polly Spiegel, heiress to the Chicago mail-order fortune. His father was Lou Cowan, president of CBS-TV during the fifties, and German on the side that raised him. Of his four grandparents, three were intellectually successful and socially assimilated. He remembers his grandmother

saying: "Tell me who you go with, and I'll tell you who you are" (43). My German side had similar histories and successes; my grandfather was a 1914 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, a well known journalist and musician, and my grandmother, a graduate of Wellesley, was a suffragette and a fashion merchandiser all her life. I remember my grandfather asking, "Well who *is* she?" and "Who is her father" when I'd introduce him to a friend. Cowan's descriptions of the parody poems they wrote and read at parties matched the German-American ones in my mother's boxes.

Our "other side," the Eastern Europeans, settled in this country more recently, only two generations ago, at the turn of this century. They believed in hard work, that all books were sacred, that tradition holds people together. They spoke Eastern languages, maintained Eastern Jewish religious customs, and settled together in cities, clinging to their old world against a hostile and powerful American environment. Certainly they were an embarrassment to the well established German Jews who felt responsible for seeing to their assimilation. Paul Cowan's fourth grandparent, his father's father, had been an Eastern European immigrant. Jake was a benevolent ne'er do well, a "displaced religious aristocrat" (40), trapped between a successful father in an old country and a successful son in a new country. He eventually disappeared from the family in debt and disgrace. But Cowan had nagging memories of his father observing traditions silently. My father's parents spoke with accents, observed religious holidays and customs, and, after having some initial trouble with my father's choice of an elegantly trained German Jewish wife, taught my mother about bar-mitzvahs and bagels.

Although Cowan's insights about his own parents and grandparents showed the conflict between their inner selves and their surfaces, those insights were always tender. Lou and Polly both produced TV shows that were metaphors for their life goals: Polly's "Conversation," a "show for a small audience which stimulated good talk," and Lou's "The $64,000 Question" which "helped reawaken a national appetite to learn" (83). His German grandmother's admonition, "Own your own business, even if it's an apple stand," blended ironically with his Eastern European grandparents' mandate to work hard on a business that insured other people's fun. Each side cherished the values of intellectual pursuit and humanistic service. His parents may have rejected their parents' advice, but they approached their own work polished on it and their values derived from it. Cowan observes, "The nuances of my parents' feelings highlighted themes that kept

reviving themselves in our lives. What was the role of money in our household? What was the role of politics and intellect? What was the connection—especially for a Jew — between wealth and good works?" (49).

Looking at these intra-Jewish, inter-cultural conflicts and the people who tried to resolve them gave me some valuable insights into the histories of all ethnic groups and their immigrations; I saw that deep inside both groups were the ancient traditions of our heritage — the Judeo-Christian values that drive this country — freedom of spirit, intellectual pursuit and humanistic service, and pride in enterprise.

To counter my emotional immersion in a final attempt to regain my lost objectivity, I discussed the book with people who had read it, and found that we had all read different books — no surprising fact. As a teacher of the theories of reading and writing, I know that the reader has the privilege of matching the author's intentions to her needs in the places that mean the most. My friend Ruth, who is very comfortable with her Judaism, focused on the second half of the book, in which Cowan described the joy he has in his synagogue and joining his wife and children in their religious studies. My friend Jane, a WASP Unitarian librarian, said that it felt like a novel; she loved it as a chronicle of a journalist who had spent half a lifetime trying to right the social ills he investigated. It was a realist-contemporary American Dream story, she said. My mother mispronounced the title; she wanted to call it "Orphans of History," implying that this book represented a whole group of alienated people whom history had rejected. Her friends criticized the book — it was contrived, insincere, the work of an overprivileged and immature person going through another passing phase. They were women who had been just like Cowan's mother, and whose children were like me. My own informal book club had as many reactions as there were people, but everyone was curious about each other's roots and their own ethnic stories.

The readers in the libraries were the same; each read the book differently and each had an ethnic insight to share. Universalizing Cowan's quest, my search, and the stories of each reader was not so difficult. I used these questions:

1. Did your own search for your "identity" leave you with similar "echoes" of individuality in your earlier life? What events prevented or allowed you to pursue them?
2. What other American ethnic groups shared the problems of conflicts between assmiliated generations and immigrants? How many generations does it take for people to "assimilate" without being embarrassed by their ethnicity?

3. Do we have conscious or unconscious intents for our children, ethnically or religiously? Do the monuments in our children's lives help us grow?
4. Do the phases of interest in our lives parallel our maturity patterns? Is this true for all of us, rich or poor, privileged or not? How do Cowan's phases translate into other ethnic, socio-economic or religious groups?

So on one October evening, in a small public library, with a group of readers who ranged from young mothers to senior citizens, Yankees to Greeks, my teaching spirit was refreshed. My life had become enriched and deepened by one book and its effect on me, and I had enriched my friends and family with the insights I could share with them. By examining two lives worth of roots and five generations of heritage, I learned some lessons about teaching I had been believing in for years, and I combined my own skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening to do it.

Cowan, Paul. *An Orphan in History.* New York: Doubleday 1982.

NOTE: The American Library Association, along with the National Endowment for the Humanities and local state Humanities councils (in this case, the New Hampshire Humanities Council and the New Hampshire State Library), have been sponsoring a bookreading and discussion program called "Let's Talk About It" for the last two years. Booklovers in thirty states can go to their local libraries and join a reading group in which they borrow, read and discuss several books related to a theme. This book was one contained within the theme "Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols." The books included are:

Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo A. Anaya
Go Tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin
An Orphan in History by Paul Cowan
The Way to Rainy Mountain by N. Scott Momaday
Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston